

**The Resonance of the Term ‘Sectarian’ in Debates over  
Educational Policy after the Civil War**

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Professor Richard Baer of Cornell University has written that “Throughout American history, ‘sectarian’ has been used to exclude and to ostracize. It is a term that is used to disparage and marginalize particular groups of Americans and particular kinds of thinking” (Baer, 449). For example, historian Diane Ravitch tells us, in the celebrated controversy in New York City in 1840, both the Public School Society and the Catholic leaders accused each other of ‘sectarianism’ (Ravitch, 48). Calling a religious group ‘sectarian’ was and is, in colloquial terms, a ‘put-down.’

In the decades after the Civil War, there were two groups of Americans against whom this term was directed: Mormons and Roman Catholics. In both cases, it was used to express a profound distrust of the effects upon American society of the religious convictions held by these groups. A typical expression of such views can be found in Josiah Strong’s book *Our Country*, first published in 1886 and then in a revised version in 1891, and widely read: “one hundred and seventy-five thousand copies were sold before 1916, and individual chapters were reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and published separately in pamphlet form.” Indeed, the Librarian of Congress, in 1916, compared its impact with that of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Herbst, ix).

Strong warned that “the Roman Catholic is not at liberty to weigh the Pope’s judgment, to try his commands by his own conscience and the Word of God – to do this would be to become a Protestant.” To make matters worse, “he stands not alone, but with many millions more, who

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are bound by the most dreadful penalties to act as one man in obedience to the will of a foreign potentate and in disregard of the laws of the land. *This, I claim, is a very possible menace to the peace of society*" (Strong, 65, emphasis in original).

The objections of Strong and others to public funding of parochial schools were not generally based upon abstract concerns about "separation of Church and State," but rather upon the presumed nefarious effect of Catholic schooling upon the children of immigrants. Strong argued that

the more moderate Roman Catholics in the United States are generally those who in childhood had the benefit of our public schools, and their intelligence and liberality are due chiefly to the training there received. In the public schools they learned to think and were largely Americanized by associating with American children. But their children are being subjected to very different influences in the parochial schools. They are there given a training calculated to make them narrow and bigoted (Strong, 80).

"Narrow and bigoted" is a good working definition of the term 'sectarian' as it has been used throughout American history; it seems likely that no significant religious group has ever referred to itself as 'sectarian.'

This theme was not original with Strong; indeed, it can be traced across the decades from at least the 1830s. Horace Bushnell, a highly influential Protestant theologian, delivered a "public fast day sermon" in 1853 on the role of the common school in relation to Catholic immigrants. Americans had been extremely generous, he told his audience of elected officials and leading citizens, in admitting immigrants to all the privileges of a free society, but "they are not content, but are just now returning our generosity by insisting that we must excuse them and their

children from becoming wholly and properly American.” The ungrateful Catholic immigrants wanted “ecclesiastical schools, whether German, French, or Irish, any kind of schools but such as are American, and will make Americans of their children.” Bushnell warned that

it has been clear for some years past, from the demonstrations of our Catholic clergy and their people, and particularly of the clergy, that they were preparing for an assault upon the common school system, hitherto in so great favor with our countrymen; complaining, first, of the Bible as a sectarian book in the schools, and then, as their complaints have begun to be accommodated by modifications that amount to a discontinuance, more or less complete, of religious instruction itself, of our “godless scheme of education” . . . Evidently the time has now come, and the issue of life or death to common schools is joined for trial. The ground is taken, the flag raised, and there is to be no cessation, till the question is forever decided, whether we are to have common schools in our country or not.

Bushnell insisted that “Common schools are nurseries thus of a free republic, private schools of factions, cabals, agrarian laws, and contests of force. . . The arrangement is not only unchristian, but it is thoroughly un-American, hostile at every point to our institutions themselves.” Catholic schools, according to Bushnell, were a menace to society, and their religious justification was in fact no justification at all. In such schools, the children of immigrants “will be instructed mainly into the foreign prejudices and superstitions of their fathers, and the state, which proposes to be clear of all sectarian affinities in religion, will pay the bills!” Bushnell found it “a dark and rather mysterious providence, that we have thrown upon us, to be our fellow-citizens, such multitudes of people, depressed, for the most part, in character, instigated by prejudices so intense against our religion.” It was his hope, however, that through the common school “we may be gradually melted into one homogeneous people” (Bushnell, 299-303).

The public school, as I show in my historical study *The Myth of the Common School* (1988), was by no means religion-free, but its supporters insisted that it was ‘nonsectarian.’ In New York City in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Free School Society sought a monopoly on the provision of ‘charity schools’ on the grounds that its Baptist, Catholic, and other rivals were ‘sectarian,’ while its own instruction was ‘nonsectarian.’ This did not mean neutral with respect to religion; in 1819, for example, the Society explained to poor parents that they had a duty to take their children to church every Sunday and “to omit no opportunity to instruct them early in the principles of the Christian religion, in order to bring them, in their youth, to a sense of the unspeakable love and infinite wisdom and power of their Almighty Creator.” While the Society was concerned to “promote the improvement of the scholars [pupils] in school learning,” they cared even more about the “more primary object of an education calculated to form habits of virtue and industry, and to inculcate the general principles of Christianity” (in Cohen II, 1120-21).

If the Legislature would grant it a monopoly on public funds for schooling, the Society argued in 1825, it would be possible “to preserve harmony and good feeling among the various religious sects, by removing all grounds for jealousy and contention.” The instruction provided would still be profoundly religious, as is evident in a manual issued by the Society the next year, instructing teachers to tell their pupils that “the intention of this school is to teach you to be good and useful in this world, that you may be happy in the world to come.” This was to be followed by a sort of catechism of moralistic teaching with a vaguely Protestant character (in Cohen II, 1123-25). As Baer points out, for the leaders of the Free School Society, as for Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, “‘sectarian’ referred to *the wrong kind of religion*” (Baer, 459, emphasis in the original).

In *Myth*, I provide a detailed discussion of how those like Horace Mann who held the liberal

Protestant beliefs – shading into Unitarianism – were opposed to teaching traditional Christian doctrines about sin and salvation, even while they insisted that schools should have a religious character. Horace Mann referred to this purged version of what both Catholics and Protestants had long believed as “the pure religion of Heaven” and insisted, in a widely-read *Report* to the Massachusetts Board of Education, that it should be taught in every public school. This is entirely consistent with the position of the Free School Society that their schools would teach “the fundamental principles of the Christian religion, free from all sectarian bias,” and with their opposition to competing schools operated by Baptists and others. It would be unfair to attribute this opposition exclusively to the Society’s ambition to enjoy a monopoly on the public funding available to privately-operated schools, though that was probably a factor; undoubtedly the members of the Society sincerely believed that they were promoting an improved set of religious convictions that would be beneficial to society.

As the Catholic presence grew, the same hostility was directed against their attempts to provide schooling based upon traditional beliefs. The same derogatory term – sectarian – was directed against their schools that had been directed against those of the Baptists and Methodists. Meanwhile, as I show in *Myth*, the perception on the part of many Protestants of all denominations that the massive immigration of Irish and German Catholics in the 1850s posed a fundamental threat to the political and cultural character of the United States led to a loss of support, among non-immigrant Protestants, for the schools sponsored by their denominations. Requiring all children to attend the common public school seemed the best answer to the supposed Catholic threat.

The fact that this hostility was not directed exclusively against Catholics, but had earlier been directed also against the more traditional Protestant denominations, does not absolve it of the

charge of discrimination on the grounds of religion.

Some recent historians have sought to minimize the influence of anti-Catholic sentiment in the development of state constitutional barriers to public funding of schools with a religious character. Instead, a principled objection to any cooperation between government and religion is posited as the mobilizing factor in a process which had strong popular support and in several national and state elections was among the primary issues. This is a radically partial and insufficient account of the actual political process in the decades after the Civil War. While there were a few ‘free-thinking’ groups in 19<sup>th</sup> century America – Philip Hamburger’s recent book discusses them at some length – these were in fact almost completely ineffectual, and it was Protestant fear of and hostility toward Catholicism as fundamentally incompatible with American life which made ‘no aid’ a winning campaign issue.

Nor was this hostility confined to the two decades before the Civil War when various violent clashes occurred and when, in Massachusetts and other states, anti-Catholic sentiment had powerful political consequences. As the crisis of war and the abolition of slavery passed, it was in Ohio that a series of political struggles during the 1870s made opposition to Catholic schooling an issue of national importance. These struggles can only be understood by seeing them in an international context of which politically-active Americans at the time were very much aware. James Garfield, the future president, told a gubernatorial campaign audience in 1875 that there was a common battle in both Europe and America against Catholic political demands: “Our fight in Ohio,” he said, “is only a small portion of the battlefield.” In that crucial year of reaction against the frustrations of Reconstruction, “Republicans chose to use religious prejudice as a political counterpoise to racial prejudice” (McAfee, 179, 172). That prejudice was against Roman Catholics, and found its focal point in the claim that ‘sectarian’ Catholic schools

were a fundamental danger.

My own recent research (to be published next year as a two-volume history of educational policy in Europe and North America, working title 'The Long Tug-of-War: Schools Between State and Civil Society') has made clear the strong relationship between contemporary developments in Europe and the American Protestant hostility toward Catholic schooling. In France and the German states including Austria, in the Netherlands and Belgium, in Italy and Spain, and in England, Scotland, and Ireland, popular schooling had developed up to the 1870s through a variety of arrangements involving close cooperation between the respective churches and the government. Such arrangements had long been criticized by an anti-clerical elite, but it was only in the 1870s, during a period of intense nationalistic sentiment and through a succession of developments precipitated in part by the Franco-Prussian War, that in each of the countries mentioned legislation was adopted directed against the influence of the Catholic Church in popular education.

It was thus no accident that similar measures were taken within a few years in country after country, including in the United States, in Canada, and in Australia; they were front-page international news, and elites determined to create unified populations to support national aspirations saw themselves as engaged in a similar struggle against Catholic influence, seen as in competition with an exclusive sense of national loyalty.

These strong parallels make it clear that the determination in the United States to limit so far as possible the scope of 'sectarian' – that is, Catholic – schooling was not the result of the lingering influence of James Madison or Thomas Jefferson, but of very contemporary political struggles over the meaning of nationality and the role of popular education in nation-building.

As Ward McAfee shows, “as the years of Reconstruction progressed, a vision of cultural homogeneity, not of individual freedom, increasingly shaped the Republican program. The public school was the focal point and thus also the primary battleground of this program.” Republicans – ‘Liberals’ in the European sense – “wanted a nation not merely united but unified, under the authority of a national ‘religion,’ which they strained to distinguish from what they regarded as inappropriate sectarian (Roman Catholic) linkages with government” (McAfee, 49, 221).

In this context, Catholic schooling was perceived as a fundamental threat to successful nation-building. The National Education Association, in 1891, warned that parochial schools initiated the children of immigrants into foreign traditions that threatened “distinctive Americanism,” and thirty years later a Methodist bishop in Detroit warned that “the parochial school is the most un-American institution in America, and must be closed” (Ross, 24, 68). It was this continuing and deeply-rooted perception that Catholic schooling was a problem that led to the Oregon legislation struck down by *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* in 1925. We are getting ahead of the story . . . but it is the same story throughout, from Lyman Beecher’s *Plea for the West* (1835) to Paul Blanshard’s *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (1949) and the 1960 presidential campaign. We look in vain for heated warnings about the threat to American society posed by the religious teaching in the thousands of Lutheran schools (though their use of German became controversial during and after World War I), or in the hundreds of Dutch Reformed and of Episcopalian schools. The concern was about Catholic schools and the religious instruction which they provided.

This should not be confused with anti-immigrant sentiment; even writers like Howard Grose, who took a highly optimistic view of the possibilities for making the children of immigrants into



loyal Americans, warned in 1906 that “the parochial school is Roman, the public school American.” He had been informed that “in parochial schools for the Slav children in Pennsylvania, English is not taught, and the children are growing up as thoroughly foreign and under priestly control as though they were in Bohemia or Galicia” (Grose, 246-47). Only the public school could transform the children of immigrants: “for the immigrant children the public schools are the sluiceways into Americanism. When the stream of alien childhood flows through them, it will issue into the reservoirs of national life with the Old World taints filtered out, and the qualities retained that make for loyalty and good citizenship” (Grose, 248).

Catholicism, by contrast, offered, according to Grose, a “nominal Christianity [which] is in many respects as much out of sympathy with American religious ideals, with democracy and the pure gospel, as is heathenism; and it is in many cases as difficult to reach, and as great an obstacle to the assimilation of the aliens” (Grose, 252).

In short, the term ‘sectarian’ as applied to schooling in the post-Civil War period was not simply a synonym for ‘religious,’ but carried with it profoundly negative assumptions about the effects of a Catholic education, assumptions which – all evidence to the contrary – are still sometimes expressed today (see, for example, Dwyer’s *Religious Schools v. Children’s Rights*). The negative connotations of ‘sectarian’ would have made it unthinkable, for example, for one of my books to be subtitled ‘Government and Sectarian Schools and Social Agencies’; that would have announced a polemic, rather than an attempt to provide a balanced account of a complex relationship.

There can be no question, then, that the use of the term ‘sectarian’ in late 19<sup>th</sup> century American political debate and legislation reflected anti-Catholic bias.

### **Brief biography**

I earned a doctorate in Educational Administration and Policy from Harvard University in 1972, and a second doctorate in Religion and Modern Culture from Boston University in 1987. My dissertation at Boston University, an historical study of controversies over education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was published as *The Myth of the Common School* (1988). Since then I have published *Choice of Schools in Six Nations* (1989); *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe* (1995); (with Ester J. de Jong) *Educating Immigrant Children: Schools and Language Minorities in 12 Nations* (1996); *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-based Schools and Social Agencies* (2000); and *Il mito della scuola unica* (with introduction and translation by Elisa Buzzi) (2004). Most recently I have published, with Belgian legal scholar Jan De Groof, *Finding the Right Balance: Freedom, Autonomy and Accountability in Education* (volumes 1 and 2) (2002); *Un difficile equilibrio: Europa continentale e mediterranea* (translated by Daniele Vidoni) (2003); *Education Freedom* (2004); and *Balancing Freedom, Autonomy, and Accountability in Education* (volumes 1, 2, and 3) (2004), as well as the articles in the *International Encyclopedia of Education*, and articles on the education of immigrants in the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Education*. I have also published approximately a hundred book chapters and journal articles on issues of educational policy.

Currently I am completing *The Long Tug-of-War: Schools Between State and Civil Society*, an historical study in two volumes, to be published in 2006 by ISI Press.

From 1970 through 1991 I was the Massachusetts state official responsible for equal educational opportunity and urban education. Since 1991 I have been professor of education at Boston University, and a Fellow of the University Professors.

I have served as an expert witness in court cases on school finance, desegregation, and bilingual education, and as a consultant on equity issues to a number of states and large cities.

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